

History of the Establishment of the Bhikkhuni Sasana

A Critical Evaluative Study based on Pali and Chinese sources

Thus it becomes clear that the philosophy of early Buddhism had no reservations whatsoever regarding the spiritual emancipation of woman. In the ocean of samsāra her chances of swimming across to the further shore were as good as those of man. Emancipation of the mind through perfection of wisdom which is referred to as *cetovimuttiṃ paññāvimuttiṃ* was the goal of religious life in Buddhism and for this the way which had proved most effective was the life of renunciation. The woman was as much encumbered by household life as man and in her spiritual earnestness she would have equally well echoed the words of the man who chooses renunciation. She would say with him that the household life is full of impediments and contrast it with the life of pabbajjā [*Sambādho gharāvāso rajopatho abbhokāso pabbajjā*. MN.I.179].

But according to the evidence of the Pali texts [AN.IV.274 ; Vin.II.253] the admission of women into the life of pabbajjā in Buddhism does not seem to have been effected with as much ease as one would expect. According to these, the Buddha appears to have shown some cautious reluctance to admit women into the Order. When Mahāpajāpatī Gotamī requested the Buddha to consent to the entry of women into his Order he is said to have put her off three times, saying: 'Do not be interested O, Gotamī, about the entry of women into my Order'[Ibid.]. This does seem to imply that the presence of women in the monastic institution of brahmacariya was considered, for some reason or other, to be detrimental to its well-being. In an atmosphere where women were considered a danger to spiritual life, their presence in the inner circle of religious life as members of the monastic community would have naturally called for serious comment. However, there is evidence that Jainism had already broken through this barrier against

women. But the vicissitudes of the Jaina monastic community, in the relations between the two orders of monks and nuns, as well as of nuns and laymen, could not apparently have been very heartening to the Buddha. Speaking of the reforms introduced by Mahāvīra with the addition of the fifth vow of chastity to the earlier cauyāma samvara of Pārśva, Jacobi says: `The argumentation in the text presupposes a decay of morals of the monastic order to have occurred between Pārśva and Mahāvīra...'[Jaina Sūtras. II. SBE. XLV. 122. n.3]. There is also evidence from another quarter of the promiscuity in the behaviour of male and female mendicants in the Buddha`s day. The Buddha takes note of this in the Culladhammasamādāna Sutta [MN. I.305].

He speaks of Samaṇas and Brāhmaṇas who repudiating the view that sensual pleasures are detrimental to spiritual progress, mingle freely with female mendicants, vociferously enjoying their company. They are reported as saying:

`Whatever can be the basis for pleading for the renunciation of sensual pleasures? What future calamity can lie in wait for us? Blissful indeed is the contact of the soft and tender hands of these young female mendicants.' [Ibid.]

However, the Buddha concedes to Ananda that women, having taken to the life of pabbajjā in Buddhism, are capable of attaining the higher fruits of religious life as far as Arahantship. [*Bhabbo Ānanda mātugamo tathāgatappavedite dhammavinaye agarasmā anagāriyam pabbajitvā sotāpattiphalaṃ 'pi sakadāgamiphalaṃ 'pi anāgāmiphalaṃ 'pi arahattaphalaṃ pi sacchikātun 'ti-* AN.IV.276.;Vin.II .254]. The considerations which seem to have weighed heavy in the mind of the Buddha regarding the admission of women into the Order are concerned more with the wider problem of the monastic organization as a whole. He would have been undoubtedly most averse to stand in the way of the personal liberty of woman. But in the interests of the collective good of the institution of brahmacariya, which was the core of the religion, women had to make certain sacrifices, surrendering at times even what might appear to have been their legitimate rights. This is evident from the following eight conditions

[*aṭṭha-garudhammā*] under which the Buddha granted them permission to enter the Order.

1. A nun who has been ordained (even) for a hundred years must greet respectfully, rise up from her seat, salute with joined palms, do proper homage to a monk ordained but that day.
2. A nun must not spend the rains in a residence where there are no monks. [See Bhikkhuni Pac.56: Vin.IV.313]
3. Every halfmonth a nun should desire two things from the Order of monks: the asking [as to the date] of the Observance day, and the coming for the exhortation. [See Bhikkhuni Pac. 59: Ibid. 315].
4. After the rains a nun must 'invite' before both Orders in respect of three matters: what was seen, what was heard, what was suspected. [See Bhikkhuni Pac. 57: Ibid.314].
5. A nun, offending against an important rule, must undergo mānatta (discipline) for half a month before both Orders.
6. When, as a probationer [*sikkhamānā*], she has trained in the six rules for two years, she should seek higher ordination from both Orders.
7. A monk must not be abused or reviled in any way by a nun.
8. From today admonition of monks by nuns is forbidden, admonition of nuns by monks is not forbidden.

Book of the Discipline,V.354-55

The insistence on these *aṭṭhagarudhammā* is the most vital issue, much more than the delayed consent of the Buddha, in the founding of the Bhikkhuni Sāsana. The delay, it may in fact be argued, would have proved useful to emphasise the conditions which he was going to lay down. It is these conditions alone which gave the women access to the monastic life in Buddhism [*Sace Ananda Mahāpajāpati Gotami aṭṭhagarudhamme paṭigaṇhāti sā va'ssā hotu upasampadā*- Vin.II.255.] The Dharmagupta Vinaya in the Chinese version compares them to a bridge over a great river by means of which one is enabled to cross over to the further bank [Taisho, Vol.22.p.923 B.]. These garudhammā

are observances which pertain to monastic propriety and procedure in the Order of Bhikkhunis in relation to the Bhikkhus. The women are not to violate these as long as they remain in the monastic community.

In the establishment of the Bhikkhunī Sāsana, these conditions seem to have engaged greater attention than even the formulation of the code of moral precepts, which incidentally is not even mentioned at this stage. There is no doubt that in maintaining the vigour and vitality of the Saṅgha, whether of the Bhikkhus or of the Bhikkhunis, the code of the Pātimokkha played a vital part. But it seems to be equally true to say that in bringing the newly inaugurated Bhikkhunī Saṅgha into a healthy relationship with the older institution of the Bhikkhu Saṅgha, the *aṭṭhagarudhammā* were calculated to play a greater role. They take no note of moral considerations. A perfect functioning of the latter, in the case of the Bhikkhunis too, was apparently taken for granted at this early stage of their Sāsana. That a similar state of affairs did exist even in the Bhikkhu Saṅgha in its early history is evident in the Kakacūpama Sutta [MN.I.124].

On a closer examination of the *aṭṭhagarudhammā* we are led to make the following observations. According to these the Bhikkhu Saṅgha is looked upon as the more mature and responsible body, evidently on account of its seniority in origin, which is capable of leading the way for the Bhikkhuni Saṅgha. This is clearly evident from the garudhammas 2 and 3 [Vin.II.255]. The Bhikkhunīs are expected to recognise the spiritual leadership of the Order of Bhikkhus. At least at the outset, the Bhikkhunis had to seek the assistance of the Bhikkhus in such vital monastic rituals like the *Pātimokkhuddesa and Bhikkhunovāda*. But it is also evident that, as circumstances necessitated and experience proved opportune, the Buddha did transfer some of these powers to the Bhikkhunis themselves [Ibid.259]. However, the recognition of the leadership of the monks over the community of nuns and this position of the Bhikkhus in loco parentis to the Bhikkhunīs seem to have continued much longer. Even when the authority to recite the Pātimokkha by themselves was finally transferred to the Bhikkhunis, the Bhikkhus were still left with the right to instruct them on its proper

performance [*Anujānāmi bhikkhave bhikkhūhi bhikkhunīnam ācikkhitum evam pātiomkkham uddiseyyāthā ' ti. Vin.II.259*].

There is also evidence of a similar reservation of power in the transference of authority to the Bhikkhunis to impose penalties and punishments on their fellow members. The Bhikkhus who carried out these acts at the outset are latterly barred from doing so and are authorised only to explain to the Bhikkhunis the proper procedure. [*Anujānāmi bhikkhave bhikkhūhi bhikkhunīnam ācikkhitum evaṃ kammaṃ kareyyāthā ' ti. Vin.II.260*]. In the matter of bhikkhunovāda too, it was a Bhikkhu who was appointed to remind the Bhikkhunis regularly of the proper observance of the aṭṭhagarudhammā. [Vin.IV.51.f]. Thus on account of this complete dependence of a bhikkhuni on the leadership of a bhikkhu the second of these eight garudhammā forbade the bhikkhunis from going into residence for the rains-retreat in a place where there were no Bhikkhus. The third garudhamma too, implies the reliance of the bhikkhunīs on the Order of Bhikkhus in the performance of the two functions of uposathapucchaka and *ovādūpasamkamana*. Both the Bhikkhus and the Bhikkhunīs seem to have been vigilant about the proper observance of these functions which they considered, no doubt, to be vital for the healthy progress of the newly established Order of nuns. At the first sign of slackness with regard to these there is a storm of protests and we notice that the authorities take immediate action to remedy it.

These considerations are brought within the legal framework of the Bhikkhunā Sāsana and the failure to observe these come to be declared punishable offences [ibid.313,315. See Bhikkhunī Pācittiya 56,59]. In other words they become part of the Bhikkhunī Pātimokkha. In the study of the sikkhapadas of the Bhikkhu Pātimokkha we have already noted this interesting phenomenon of the change over into legal statutes of what was once observed as honoured conventions.

The garudhammā 4,5 and 6 concern themselves with some of the other major items of administration in the Buddhist monastic community, viz.(i) the performance of the pavāraṇṇā at the end of the rains retreat, (ii) the imposition of

necessary penalties on the commission of a grave offence, and (iii) the conferment of upasampadā or higher monastic status. As far as the Bhikkhunīs are concerned, they are barred under these garudhammā from performing any of these acts within their own Order of the Bhikkhuni Saṅgha. These acts of the Bhikkhunīs are not considered valid unless they are carried out jointly together with the monks. However, practical considerations soon necessitated amendments to these and we see in the revised version of these conditions the sanction given to the bhikkhunīs to perform these acts, in the first instance, by themselves. Then they are expected to bring their decisions before the Bhikkhu Saṅgha for ratification. The following is the amended procedure for the conferment of upasampadā on a Bhikkhuni by the Bhikkhu Saṅgha: *anujānāmi bhikkhave ekato upasampannāya bhikkhunīsaṅghe visuddhāya bhikkhusaṅghe upasampadan 'ti.* [Vin.II. 271,274]. It shows that the candidate had been already approved by the Bhikkhuni Saṅgha. The Bhikkhunis were also allowed to perform their pavaraṇā in two stages before the two assemblies. first among themselves and then before the Bhikkhu Saṅgha [*Anujānāmi bhikkhave ajjatanā pavāretvā aparajju bhikkhusaṅghe pavāretun 'ti.* Ibid.275].

Thus, from the manner in which the Buddha directed the activities of the Bhikkhunīs it becomes clear that he did realise that as the Bhikkhunīs formed a part of the single body of the Saṅgha, their decisions would affect not only themselves, but also the rest of that vast organization. Hence the Bhikkhus were given the right to advise and assist the Bhikkhunīs in their affairs, and thus regulate the destinies of the Sāsana. Public opinion must have played a considerable part in bringing Bhikkhunīs under the wing of the Bhikkhu Saṅgha. At any rate, it appears to have been considered wise to have all the important monastic activities of the Bhikkhunis linked up with the more established and senior group of the Bhikkhu Saṅgha. However, when and wherever this advisory role had to be transferred from the collective organization of the Bhikkhu Saṅgha to a single individual, the Buddha took every necessary precaution to avoid possible abuse of privilege.

He has laid down a very comprehensive list of eight requirements which should be satisfied before a monk could be selected to the role of a *bhikkhunovādaka* to give counsel to the congregation of nuns. There seems to be little doubt about his anxiety and his foresight regarding the safety and well-being of the female members of his Order. A monk who is entrusted to preside over their welfare should conform to perfect standards of moral virtue. He should also possess a thorough knowledge of the teaching of the Master and know well the complete code of the Pātimokkha covering both the Bhikkhus and the Bhikkhunīs. He should be of pleasant disposition, mature in years and acceptable to the Bhikkhunīs, and above all, should in no way have been involved in a serious offence with a Bhikkhuni [Vin.IV.51].

The three remaining *garudhammā* 1,7 and 8, appear to have baffled some students of Buddhism as being contrary to the Buddha's general attitude to women. However, if these are examined carefully in their context, this apparent contradiction becomes less glaring. They all strive to see that the Bhikkhunīs do not, under any circumstance, assert their superiority over the Bhikkhus. We notice that even in the observance of *sikkhāpadas*, the Bhikkhunīs are to follow the lead of the Bhikkhus wherever the *sikkhāpadas* are common to both groups. The Buddha advises the Bhikkhunīs to follow the Bhikkhus in the practice of such *sikkhāpada* [...*yathā bhikkhū sikkhanti tathā tesu sikkhāpadesu sikkhathā' ti*. Vin.II 258]. But referring to the *sikkhāpada* which are peculiar to the Bhikkhunīs, he suggests that they should be followed, as they are laid down, according to the letter of the law [...*yathāpaññattesu sikkhāpadesu sikkhathā' ti*. Ibid.258]. What seems to follow from these words of instruction to the Bhikkhunīs is that even if there was a difference between the text of the *sikkhāpada* laid down for the Bhikkhus and their practice at the time, the Buddha did not think it wise, for purposes of communal harmony, to leave room for the Bhikkhunīs to be critical of this discrepancy. Such a challenge would have completely undermined the prestige and the authority of the older institution of the Saṅgha, quite out of

proportion to any degree of moral good it could bring about by the correction of Bhikkhus by the Bhikkhunīs.

There is evidence to show that the Buddha was always concerned with the esteem in which the public held his monastic organization. Such a consideration was vital for its existence and prosperity. The first remarks which he made to his erring disciples as he criticised their conduct always pertains to this [*N'etaṃ mogha purisa appasannānaṃ vā pasādāya pasannānaṃ vā bhiyyobhāvāya*. Vin.I.58; II.2; III.21,45.]. As much as the Buddha wanted his disciples to correct their mistakes and be of faultless conduct he did not want any of them to divulge to any one other than a Bhikkhu or a Bhikkhunī the more serious offences of their fellow members. Such an intimation was allowed only with the approval of the Bhikkhus [*Yo pana bhikkhu bhikkhussa duṭṭhullam āpattim anupasampannassa āroceyya aññatra bhikkhusammutiyā pācittiyaṃ*. Vin.IV.31.]. One who violates this injunction is guilty of a Pācittiya offence [Pac.9]. This provision was undoubtedly made with the best of intentions and should not be misjudged as contributing in any way to the perpetuation of monastic offences. On the other hand, it is in fact repeatedly declared that it is irregular for a monk to conceal intentionally an offence of one member from the rest of the community. Pacittiya 64 of the monks and Pārājika 2 and Sanghādisesa 9 of the nuns are all calculated to avoid such a possibility [Vin.IV.127,216,239]. All these precautions, therefore, seem to be a part of a system of internal security set up by the Buddha in the interest of the monastic organization. They emphasise the Buddha's concern both for the public esteem and for the moral soundness of his Order.

There seems to be a general agreement about the fact that the eight *garudhammā* were laid down by the Buddha as a condition governing the establishment of the Bhikkhunī Sāsana. However, strange as it may seem, after the Bhikkhunī Sāsana was instituted under the leadership of Gotamī, she appears before Ānanda to make the request that the Buddha should remove the first *garudhamma* and allow Bhikkhus and Bhikkhunis to pay courtesies to each

other according to seniority alone [Ibid.257-58]. This could hardly be true to the spirit in which Gotamī accepted the *garudhammā* [Ibid.255-56]. We are inclined to think that she was here undoubtedly subjected to the pressure of her own group.

This dissentient note which we find recorded in the Cullavagga does not seem to have found general acceptance elsewhere. Of the Chinese Vinaya texts it is only the Mahīśāsakas who record it and that too with a different emphasis [Taisho. Vol.22 p.186 A]. According to their text Gotamī, prior to her being ordained, sends Ānanda to the Buddha to request him to make this change. The Buddha refuses to do so and says that since he has now allowed women to enter the Order they should follow what has been laid down and not go against it. In the Cullavagga too, the Buddha declines to make this concession. But in trying to give a reason for this attitude of the Buddha the Theriya tradition attempts to make out that in the organization of the Sasana social considerations, as much as moral and ethical values, loomed large in the mind of the Master. In the Cullavagga he is reported as saying: 'Not even the Titthiyas who propound imperfect doctrines sanction such homage of men towards women. How could the Tathāgata do so?' [Vin.II.258].

We should also here consider the fact that any concession for the abrogation of what had already been laid down after careful deliberation would be grossly contradictory to the ideal which the Buddha and his early disciples appear to have upheld regarding the observance of the rules and regulations laid down for the guidance of monastic life [Ibid.III.231]. The reply which the Buddha seems to have given to Gotamī in the Chinese version of the Mahīśāsaka Vinaya is definitely more in keeping with this spirit. But we should take note of the fact that this reply would run contrary to the Theriya tradition, which at some stage, seems to have accommodated the idea that the Buddha conceded the abrogation of the minor rules [DN.II.14; Vin.II.287].

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See further Buddhist Monastic Discipline by Jotiya Dhirasekera [now Bhikkhu Dhammavihari] pp. 310-322 in the 2007 edition on The Abolition of the Lesser and Minor Rules of Training. First edition 1982.

As far as we are aware there is one other Vinaya tradition which records a challenge of the *garudhammā*. The Chinese version of the Dharmagupta Vinaya has a chapter entitled Bhikkhunī Khandhaka wherein the question is asked whether the Bhikkhunīs cannot accuse the Bhikkhus under any circumstances [Taisho. Vol.22. p.927 A] The Buddha replies to say that they could not do so even if the Bhikkhus violated the rules of discipline or were guilty of offences. These two protests on the part of the Bhikkhunis seem to show that the Bhikkhunī Saṅgha, or at least a section of it, resisted what it considered to be harsh legislation unfavourable to them.

At the same time one has to view dispassionately the position of the Buddha, who as the head of the Bhikkhu Sangha which was already a well groomed institution, had to safeguard against its disintegration through dispute and discontent. The fifth accusation levelled against Ānanda at the First Council, that he agitated for the admission of women into the Order [Vin.II.289], is a clear indication that even after the recognised success of the Bhikkhunī Sāsana [Apadāna II.535, v.79], there was a section of the Bhikkhus who formed as it were a consolidated opposition against it. The motive for such an attitude could have been generated by the fear of being eclipsed by the newer Order. The Chinese version of the Mahīśāsaka Vinaya includes a statement which is ascribed to the Buddha which seems to lend support to this assumption. The Buddha says that if there were no Bhikkhunis in the Sāsana, then after his death the male and female lay-devotees [upāsaka and upāsikās] would have honoured the Bhikkhus in diverse ways. But now that the Bhikkhunīs had entered the Order it would not happen so [Taisho Vol.22 p.186 B]. It is difficult here to decide how and why the presence of Bhikkhunīs in the Sāsana brought about such a radical change in the attitude of laymen towards the Bhikkhus.

Why were the Bhikkhus deprived of the honour that would have been theirs had not the Bhikkhunīs appeared on the scene? Are the Bhikkhunīs to be held responsible for the loss of prestige of the Bhikkhus? At any rate, this record of the Mahīśāsakas was undoubtedly representative of the opinion of the day regarding the Bhikkhuni Sāsana.

The Pali records of the Theriya tradition which belong to an earlier phase of the history of the Sāsana give expression to a similar feeling in the chastisement of Ānanda in whom ultimately lay the responsibility for the admission of women into the Order. An echo of this is felt in the Mahīśāsaka Vinaya where Ananda apologises to the Buddha for having requested him to permit women to enter the Order. But the Buddha absolves him saying that he did so unwittingly under the influence of Māra [Taisho Vol.22 p.186 A]. The Theriya tradition is not alone again in expressing the fact that the presence of women in the Sāsana would reduce its life span by half. We find it recorded in the Chinese version of the Dharmagupta Vinaya that the Buddha told Ānanda that if women did not enter the Order it would have lasted 500 years longer [Ibid.p.923 C. See also Vin.II.256].

It becomes clear from what has been said so far that at the time of crystalization of Theriya traditions two ideas regarding the establishment of the Bhikkhuni Sāsana stood out clearly. A section of the Bhikkhu Saṅgha was reproachful of Ananda because he interceded with the Buddha for the sake of the bhikkhunīs. The admission of women was also considered a categorical danger to the successful continuance of the Sāsana. In the light of all this evidence a study of the garudhammā reveals to us the fact that the Buddha was keenly conscious of the need to steer clear of the possible rivalries of the Bhikkhus and the Bhikkhunīs and maintain healthy and harmonious relations between the two groups.